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The Age of consequences

Matthew Murray

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THESIS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Imaging Arts

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
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THE AGE OF CONSEQUENCES

By

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ABSTRACT

Photography has played a major role in documenting social shifts and preserving memories of people and places beyond their death. My thesis exhibit examines the loss of places that are central to our society's identity, left as abandoned husks in our midst. By creating a memorial to our own era, and eulogizing it as a time when our own actions began to have serious and long-lasting effects, we envision these sites as signifiers of the decline of America as an empire and a grim harbinger of things yet to come. While photography of modern abandonments has been derided as "ruin porn," the function that the photography of such sites serves is that of a sentinel. They are physical evidence that failures to adapt are met with harsh repercussions.

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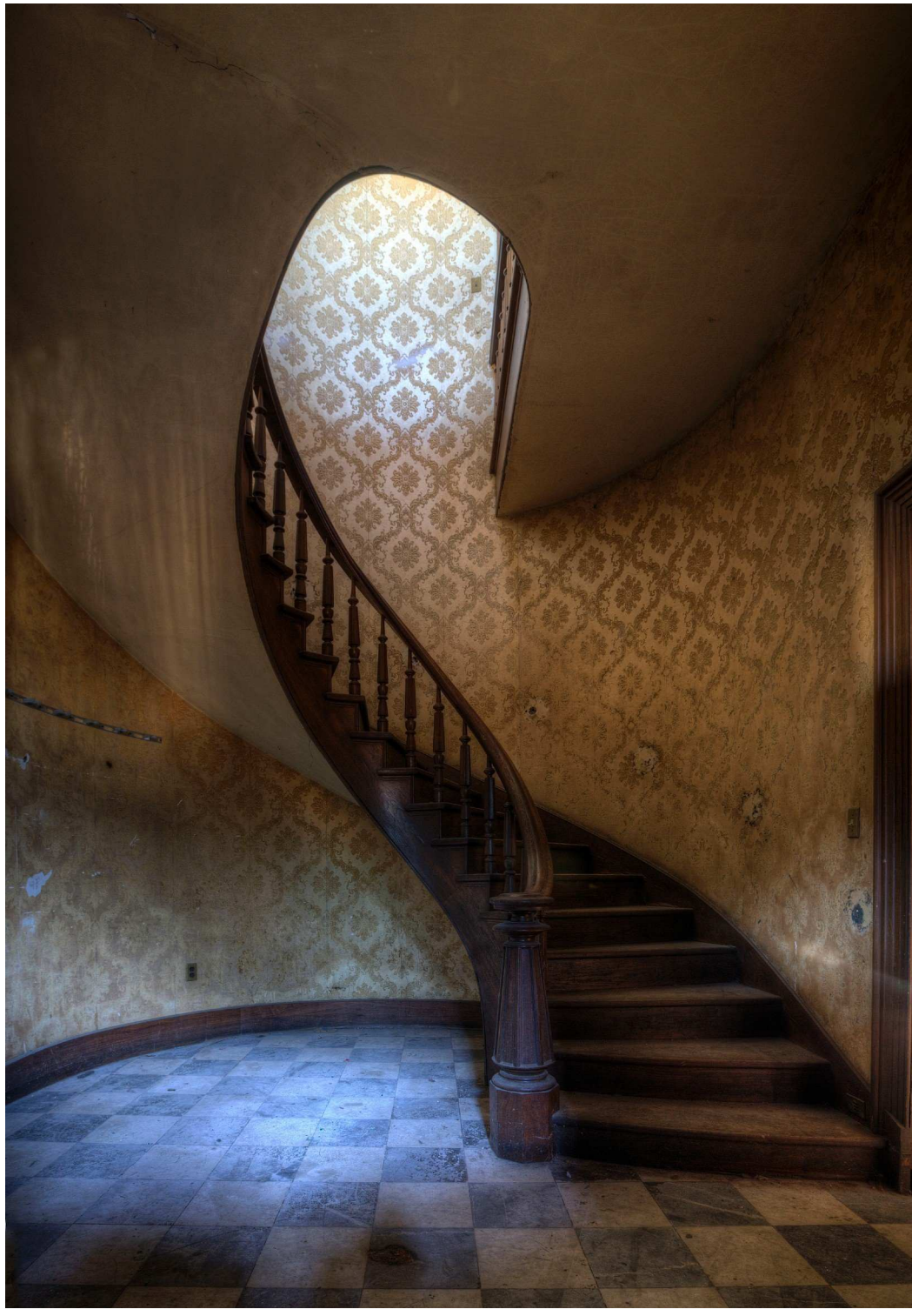
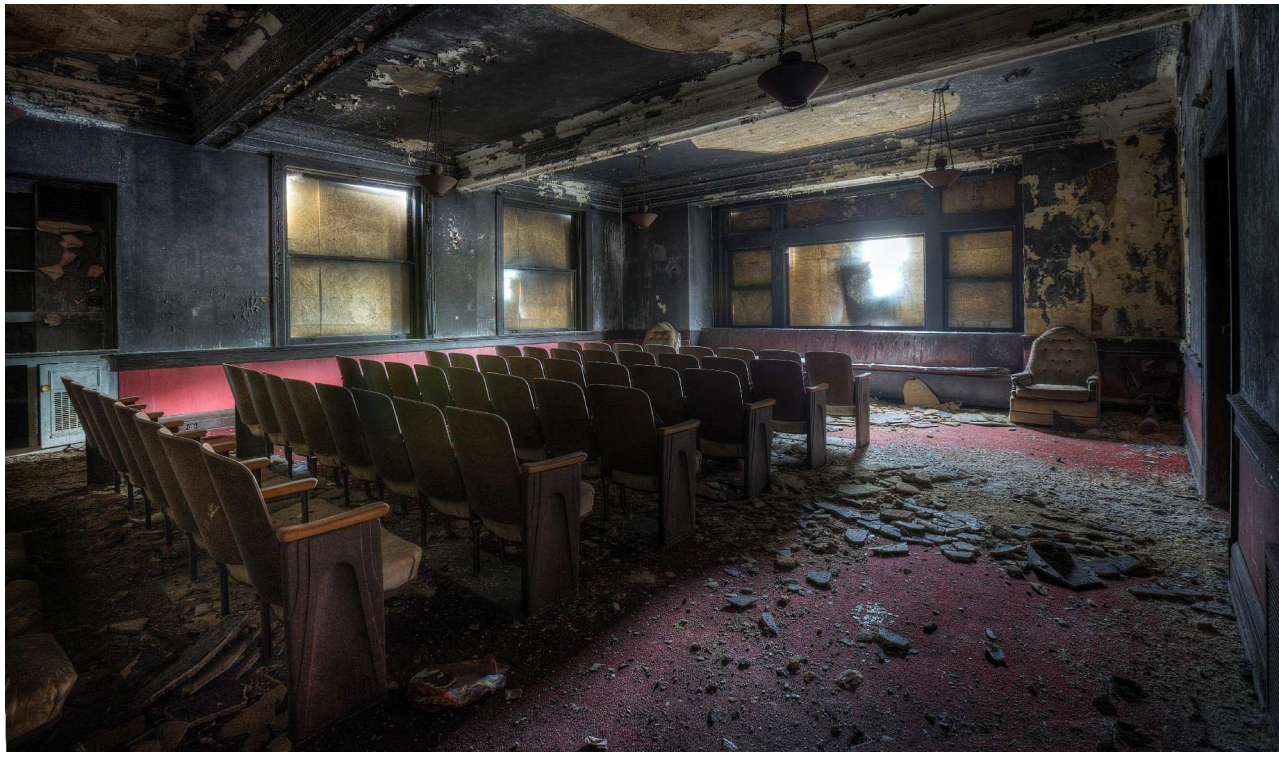


At its core, the photography of ruins is fundamentally about death. Though the subject involves many elements including art criticism, history, preservation advocacy, and sociology, the very basis for the entire genre is that the photographs are of abandoned or functionally dead spaces. It could be argued that such spaces still house life (in the form of the flora and fauna that reclaim them), and therefore are spaces in transition, but the key element is that what they once were created for is no longer. Much in the same way, a host of chemical and biological processes continue in a corpse but it is still no longer considered living. It is this concept that frames many of the discussions and accusations about the genre; those living in Detroit, for example, chafe at their city being characterized as "dead" when there are still living citizens and businesses that inhabit it. Nevertheless, this aspect of the work is what frames our response, and is critical to decoding our reactions (and the reactions of others) to it.

The set of expectations and taboos surrounding the photography of death is firmly entrenched. We expect that the images will be presented with respect, and we expect that the photographer will not 'take advantage' of the subject by exploiting them. Sally Mann's work photographing corpses at the University of Tennessee's anthropological facility where decay is studied provoked strong reactions from viewers (much to her delight) because she drew



them uncomfortably close to this fine line. It does raise a host of uneasy questions about motive - such as whether Mann was using the photographs of remains for shock value to promote her career. Grant Morrison wrote in *The Guardian* that Mann was "observed happily wandering from cadaver to cadaver, prodding this body part and stroking that one." (Morrison). Issues of privacy and the idea that someone could potentially treat our remains or those of a loved one in a similar manner are never far from the audience's mind. Conversely, there is Mann's own statement that "There's a new prudery around death. We've moved it into hospital, behind screens, and no longer wear black markers to acknowledge its presence. It's become unmentionable." (Morrison). Contemporary artists such as Andres Serrano, Enrique Metinides, and Maeve Berry also photograph the remains of the dead, and have similar controversies surrounding their work. The photography of corpses is far from a new practice and was in fact much more widespread in the past. Post-mortem photographs of deceased family members or criminals were common in the nineteenth century, yet flourished for different reasons.

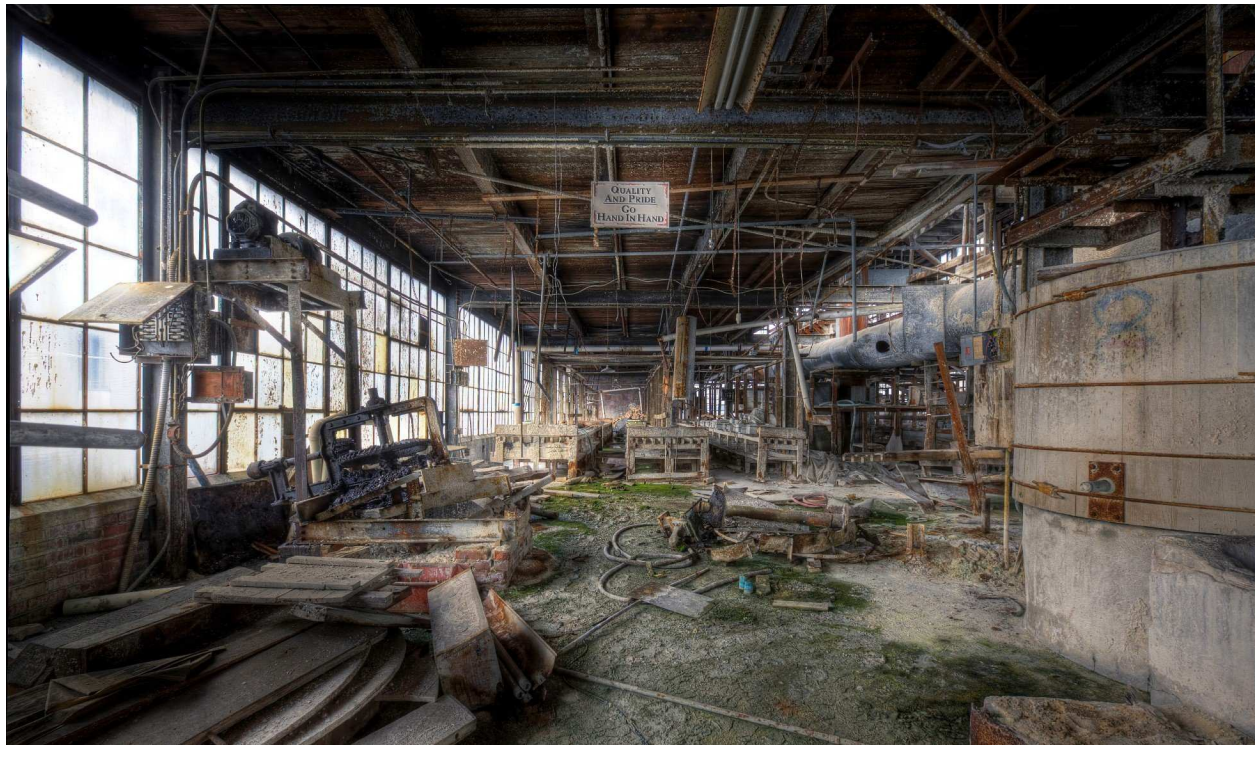
While an abandoned building can certainly be anthropomorphized either intentionally or unintentionally, and while it is in many cases used as a metaphor for the human body or spirit, the simple fact is that it is not a corpse. Shattered windows may resemble eyes, open doors may remind us of mouths hanging agape, but an abandoned structure is a man-made object. While life has inhabited it, it has never been a living entity. Does this mean that viewing it with the same set of standards and preconceptions is unfair? While a derelict building may in actuality not be a corpse, in some ways it may perhaps be as significant as one. A human's body holds a connection to those who knew or loved them, just as a dead factory may have had deep personal significance to hundreds if not thousands of workers. A church is not just an object, it is for many a symbol of a union with the divine, a place where babies are baptized, couples are married, solace is sought, and the deceased are put to rest. While the meaning and use of these sites can be called merely projections of our own will

and desire, these connections are very real and very deeply rooted in the emotions of those who harbor them. To see a place you once called home destroyed by vandals may not physically injure you, but it is an erasure of your past, an attack on a part of your being. We expect a photographer who deals with these sites to tread lightly and with respect, and rightfully so; they are the bodies of hopes and ambitions, and in their link to our shared heritage and common past, they are in essence a part of all of our 'extended family'. Far from images of actual corpses that some may consider shocking and gruesome, these sites allow us to confront mortality on a much larger scale in a context that is perhaps less immediately horrific.

However, while closure can be one intent/reaction, so too can the idea of "disclosure". In "Never Again and Its Discontents", an essay about the purpose of museum exhibits about atrocities, Laurie Beth Clark describes the possibility of disclosure as a form of activism or protest. While exhibits with the intention of closure are there to essentially fit "a conventional model of trauma therapy wherein a patient orchestrates a structured visit to the setting of a traumatic experience in order to put the pain to rest" (Clark 70), those with the purpose of disclosure favor "learning from the past and perpetual vigilance lest we repeat these crimes." (Clark 73). This is the expectation that I find is most common of the photography of ruins: the photographer will disclose the history of a site, the status of the community and the impact the loss had on it while advocating for preservation and prevention of the future loss of historic structures. While this is certainly a legitimate endeavor and one that I have worked towards with my own photography, it can also be limiting. Rather than the photography of ruins existing for its own sake, it must justify itself by what it does or tries to do. It can't simply provide a locus for closure, or a eulogy. This is much derided as a shallow lament for a nostalgic past that never existed or an act of wallowing in the loss of others.

Further complicating the subject of the representation of death through ruins, and directly connected to the closure/disclosure schism in their reading, is the separate


LIST OF DEPARTMENTS
48 HOTEL SHIPPING
49 BURNISHING & SELECTION
11 CUP SHOP
22 REFRACTORY
26 BISQUE KILN
27 BISQUE SELE
28 BISQUE WARE
29 CREST BELT
30 DECAL MANU
33 PRINT SHOP
35 OVERGLAZE
36 ENGRAVING
37 UNDERGLAZ
39 GOLD LINI
40 DINNERWARE WAREHOUS
41 GLAZE MAKI
42 SPRAY DIPP
43 DECORATING
4 GLOST KILN
46 GLOST SELEC
47 LOST WAREH
NEW YORK
BOSTON
THOMPSON


QUALITY
AND PRIDE
GO
HAND IN HAND


WHERE THERE IS NO VISION, THE PEOPLE PERISH

set of expectations we have for artists representing their own impending demise versus the artist representing the demise of another. Thus far we have discussed the set of obligations that are inherent in representing the death of another. Mann's work exemplifies this in her critics' accusations that she exploits the death of others. That she could merely celebrate the colors and forms of the decay of corpses seems perverse and unpalatable. Chekov observed that what makes a great writer is that they "move you in a certain direction and they summon you there too, and you feel, not with your mind alone, but with your whole being, that they have a goal, like the ghost of Hamlet's father who does not come and trouble the imagination for nothing" (Boyd). When an artist examines the death of another, it is expected that they are not troubling us with the ghost of another for nothing. We anticipate an almost narrative quality to their work, a certain dignity and gravitas, and a destination that their work will take us to where we can close the book on the subject and leave with a feeling of greater understanding not only of the deceased, but of mortality and the meaning of life itself. Certainly this is evident in cinema and literature. For the death of another person to be displayed as an example of chaos and meaninglessness is almost unheard of.

However, if an artist is representing his or her own death, many of the strictures on how the work is presented vanish. We don't expect someone like Jo Spence or David Wojnarowicz (who represented their imminent deaths through self portraits) to provide us with some lofty understanding of the meaning of life or death. We understand and accept that their work may be frustrated, confused, angry, accusatory, or sad. Much as we try to allow those who are coping with their own death the freedom to process it in whatever way they need to, we allow the artist to represent the subject as best they see fit and try to view the work for what it is. In this case, impending death is the only context that is needed.

While the depiction of abandoned buildings is most frequently seen as the

artist's approach to the death of another, and while this is in some cases accurate, *it can also be read as their reaction to their own death*. If this is the case, then the reading may change entirely and the dialogue over whether closure/disclosure are critical to the merits of the work is rendered nearly irrelevant. What of a photographer who is diagnosed with a fatal illness and chooses to sublimate that into images of ruins? Would we call their work "ruin porn" or expect that they provide some outside context about the impact on the community? Would we ask that they present their work as activism or as a political statement about the destruction of the past, or could we simply allow it to exist as a manifestation of their own meditation on their mortality? If we would be more lenient with such photographs under these auspices, we must ask ourselves if expecting a terminal illness to allow a work to speak for itself on mortality is justified. After all, we are all mortal, and when stripped of outside context the presentation of ruins speaks of a death that awaits us all. Furthermore, if a body of work presents these places as the death of a way of life or worse, the death of an empire, unless the person presenting them can manage to extricate him or herself from the situation, their death may be implicit in the work. Even if it is not the artist's intention to present their depictions of ruins as some sort of indicator of impending social collapse as I do, the slow deterioration and eventual demolition of a location (or even its renovation, which would still erase the current state of disrepair) are very much analogous to the deletion of their existence and the qualities that make it up by time, and ultimately the frailty of the human condition. If the purpose of the artwork is an exploration of these things, is it not somewhat demeaning to the art and the artist to ask that they package their message for our consumption? If this is so, how does this translate to the artwork that is literally dealing with the dead?

These are questions without easy answers, but they merit serious thought before one enters into the critical dialogue about whether a work dealing with ruins is justified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or not and whether or not we dismiss the artist and their intentions. Perhaps the one thing that we are excused for expecting of the work is some intentionality and thought, regardless of what that intentionality or thought may be. Whether dealing with the death of others, one's own death, or the subject of mortality as a whole, it is a heavy and difficult topic to navigate. I do not think that it is unreasonable to expect, like Chekov did of writers, that the artist does not trouble your imagination for nothing.

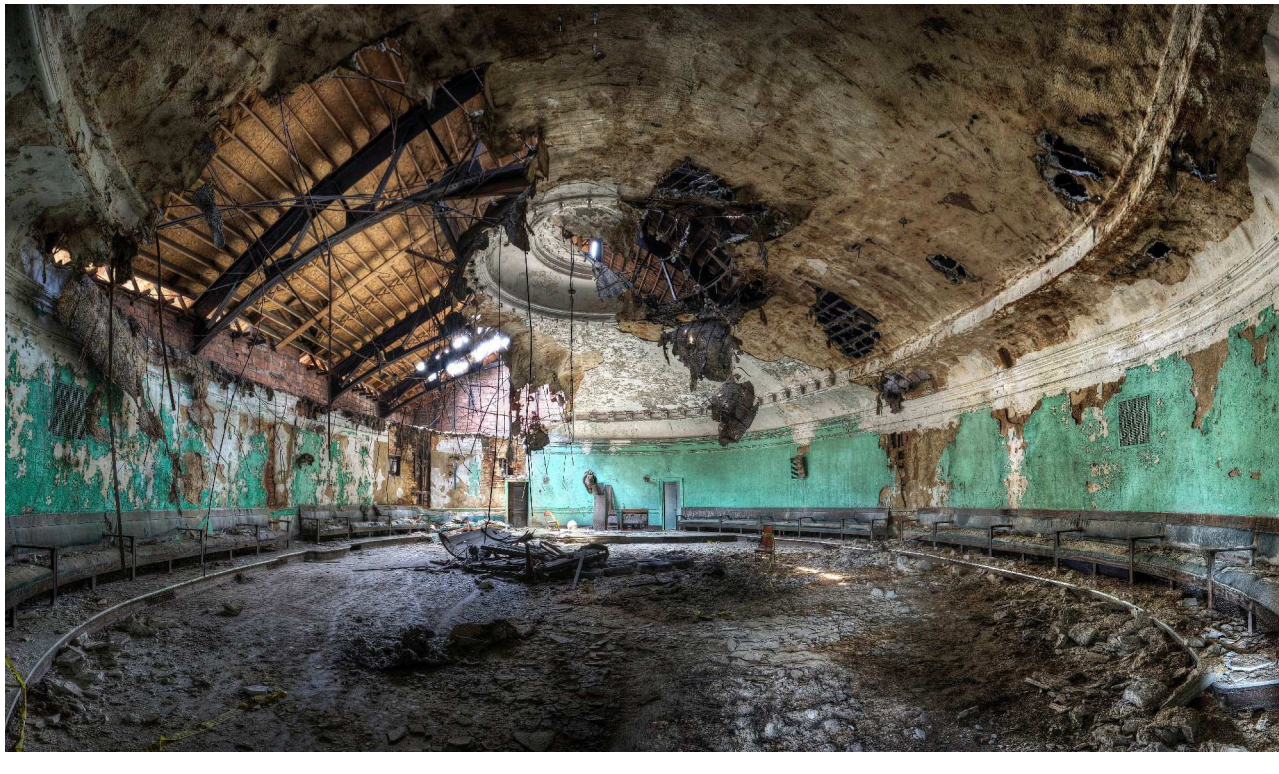
When I began seeking out abandoned buildings years ago as an exploration of the American asylum system and the history of mental health care, I had little idea how focused my entire life would become on it. Soon my interests had spread beyond state hospitals and I was visiting as many derelict structures as I could find. The sense of the sublime - the awe-inspiring and fearful - was equally present in a power plant's massive turbine hall or the delicate way ivy worked its way through a broken window and across the wall of a forgotten bedroom. As the years passed I visited churches, homes, schools, factories, prisons, hotels, banks, hospitals, asylums, grain silos, oil refineries, steel mills, coal breakers, stockyards, shipyards, and so many others that I can barely recall them all. What had started as curiosity had become a preoccupation, which then became an obsession.

As time passed, however, a certain uneasiness set in. The places I was visiting were too big, too widespread; sites like Carrie Furnaces (once part of the Homestead Steel complex in Pittsburgh) and Bethlehem Steel were the first and second largest steel manufacturers in the nation respectively, and entire cities had been built around places like them. Now they were rusting away as the economies around them imploded. I started researching sites to photograph and was astonished at just how prevalent places like these were. For example, when I decided to seek out closed churches, in one mid-sized town alone I found dozens. When I turned my attention to the school system, the rates of building closures across America shocked me. I found entire towns that were like graveyards, places where I could easily visit a dozen different sizeable derelict locations in the space of a day. Everywhere I

looked, communities were reeling from staggering losses that seemed to seep outward from the lack of industries to the vital infrastructure that supported the towns built around them.

Unlike the demise of the enormous ice harvesting industry along the Hudson River, which had become extinct virtually overnight with the advent of the refrigerator, it was clear to me that these phenomena were not the result of progress. Often no comparable industries had come along to replace the ones I photographed, and often no new schools or hospitals were built to replace the old ones. The jobs had been ported to other countries where labor and environmental laws could be easily skirted, and American businesses were unable to compete with rivals who could easily beat their manufacturing costs because they could pay workers less than a dollar a day, ignore safety regulations, or dump industrial waste without fear of consequence. The resulting imbalance made for cheaper goods for American consumers, but came at the cost of more jobs - jobs that were replaced by low wage service industry work, if at all. Churches found the donations that they operated on dwindling, schools and other civil services were cut back and then shuttered as local and state coffers ran dry. The arts were choked as patrons with disposable income became a rarity, and entire neighborhoods sat vacant, victims of foreclosures. I came to realize that the nexus of my photographic work, my website *abandonedamerica.us*, was not only a literal descriptor (as in, a showcase of abandoned buildings in America), but also referred to what I believed to be the abandonment of America itself - its ideals, its way of life, and its future.

Much of the work I have seen on the subject of abandoned sites specializes in one type of building, such as the asylum system, or on one place - frequently that poster child for urban decay, Detroit. By presenting one area or type of building, the content can be compartmentalized. In the case of the asylum system, many believe that the shift to community-based care is a triumph over the warehousing, abuse, and stigma that came to be synonymous with the state hospital system, and so we can view its collapse with a sort of idle detachment and comfort ourselves knowing that in the end it was probably for the best, even



though we have gone back to many of the same problems that lead Dorothea Dix to advocate for the foundation of the system in the first place. In Detroit's case, the demise of the automobile industry and the toll it took on what was once the fourth largest city in the nation are well known and in a sense we almost expect to see the city in ruins now.

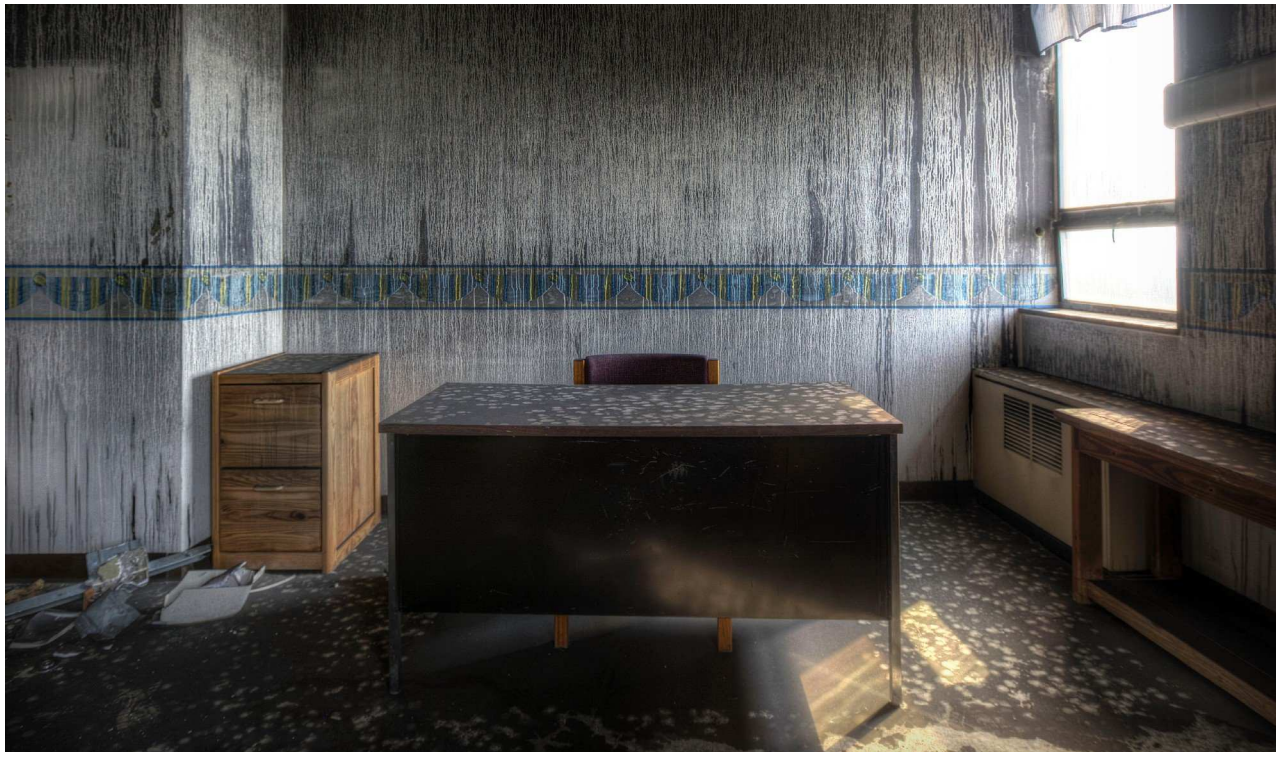
My work, however, is intended to connect the dots, to show that it is not simply one type of structure or one geographic location to which this is isolated. Major cities across the United States, from Buffalo to Cleveland to Baltimore and far beyond, and many smaller ones as well, are all grappling with how to redefine themselves as iconic architecture is lost and the industries that created the need for the cities in the first place wither and die. Interest and involvement in historic preservation has grown by leaps and bounds, but it would be much less prevalent and necessary if there weren't so many places that are endangered and so many destroyed every year. Much like a surgeon attempting to operate on a corpse, we try to figure out what to do with urban blight and abandonment without addressing the root causes which create it.

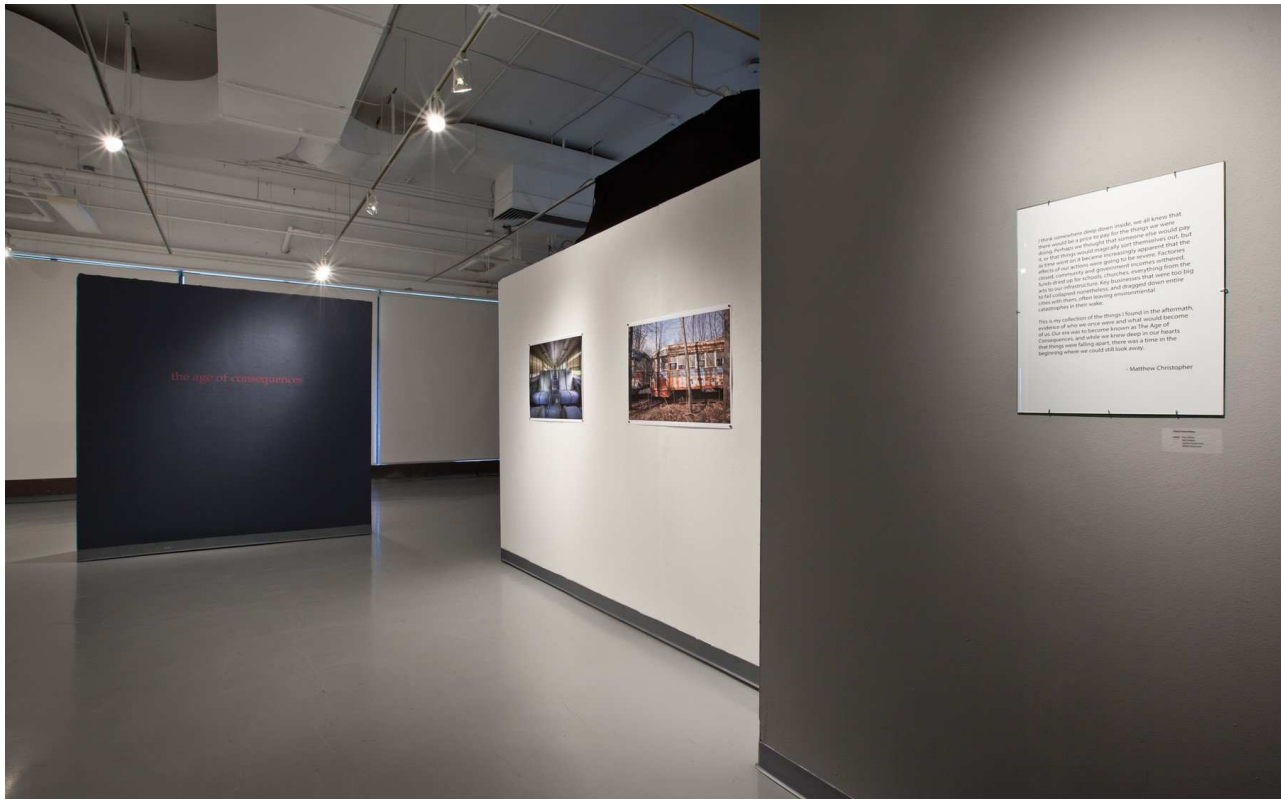
While my photography may take cues from the picturesque representations of ruins created two centuries ago by artists like Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Caspar David Friedrich, and Hubert Robert, and while I see many universal themes represented in the external depiction of our own mortality and transcendence through reclamation by nature, this work is very much rooted in the present day. It would be easy to create a body of work romanticizing some idyllic notion of Americana, but these sites are not just large museums full of *in situ* artifacts. They are indeed time capsules in a sense, but they represent not only the past but our present day as well. They also offer a sobering glimpse of what our future might be if we do not address the problems that have created this situation. It is perhaps not my place to spell out what I believe specific solutions to that dilemma might be. These sites are part of our shared heritage, and rather than present them as part of some politically-motivated polemic, I feel that it must be left to the viewer to acknowledge them and interpret their

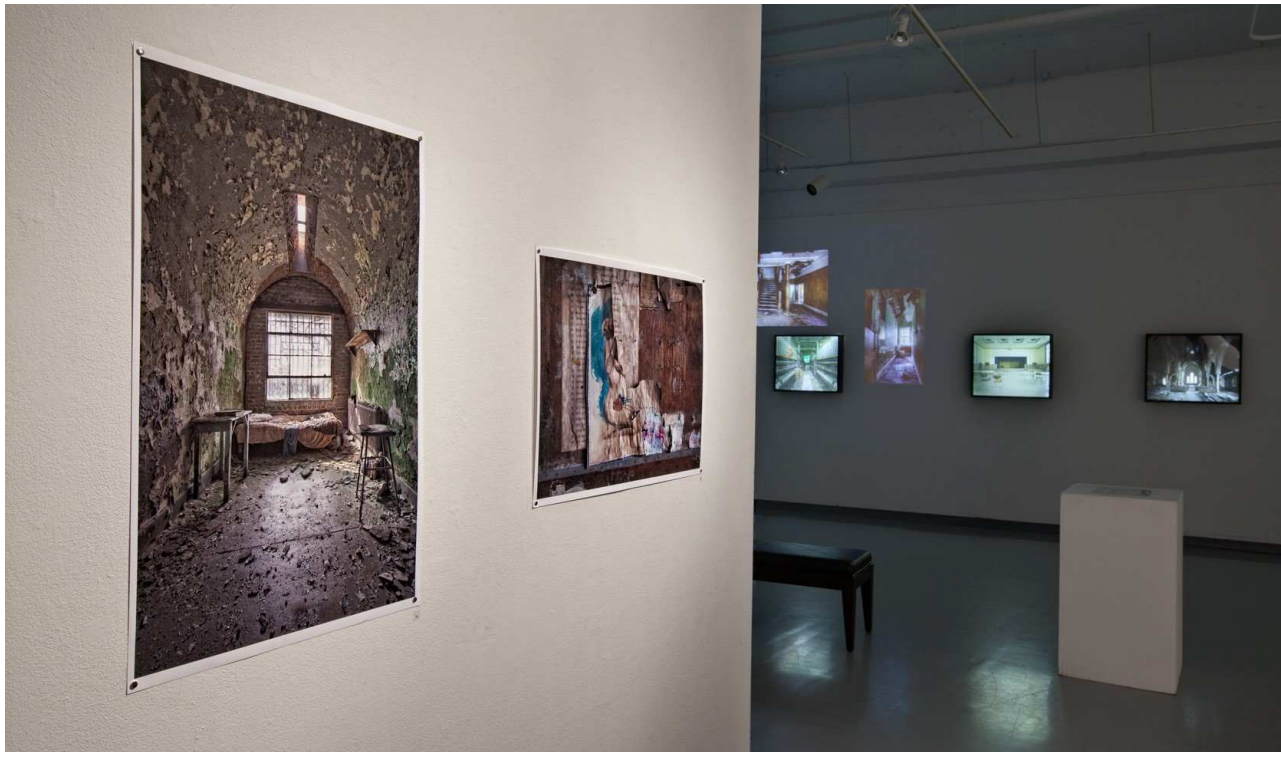
significance.

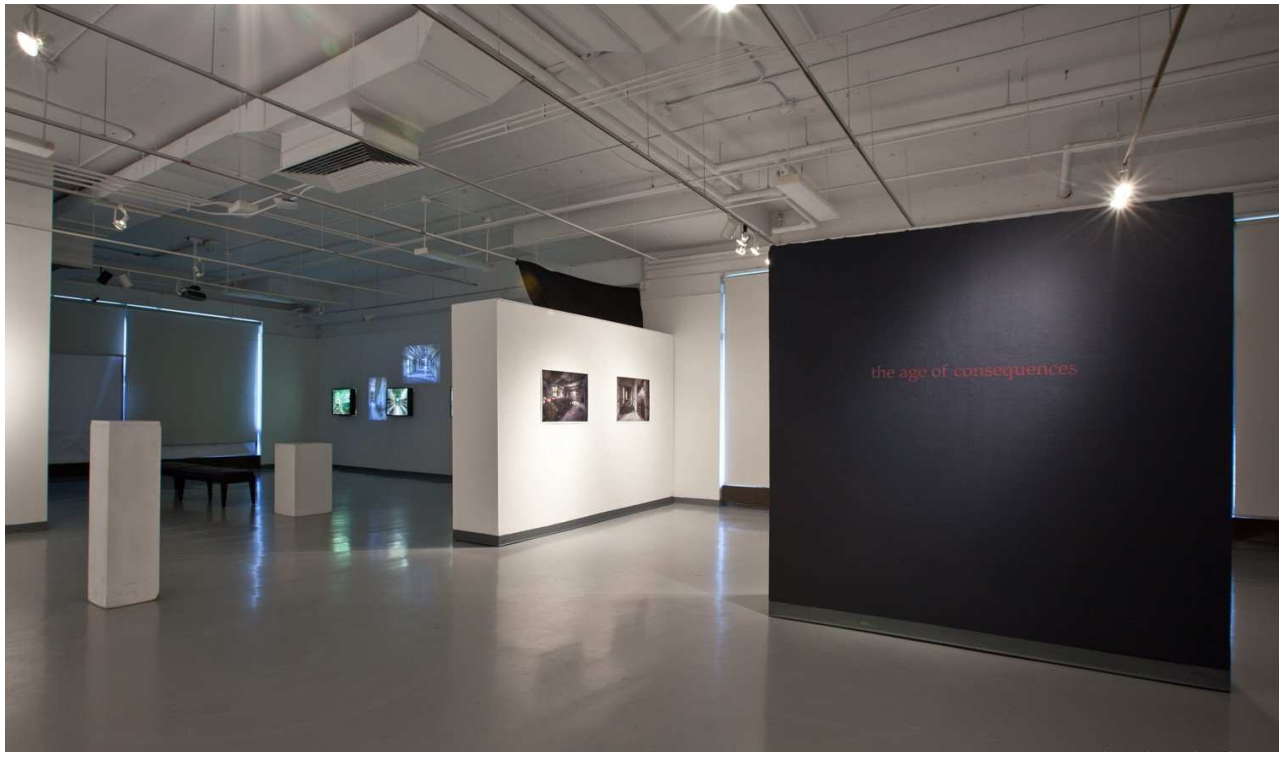
That being said, I do feel that we have been indoctrinated to point our fingers at others rather than accepting that we all share ownership of this situation. All too often I have seen stalemates between conflicting ideologies result in buildings left vacant and exposed to the elements rather than reused, until it is too late to save them. In this sense they are also symbols of the current American landscape. I believe we have entered an Age of Consequences, a point where our own actions for the past several decades are having catastrophic effects on our towns, our national economy, and our environment.

These sites are not anomalies, and they are far too important to be ignored. Buildings serve as a mirror in which the inhabitants see their own character reflected. They are built with meaning, used with purpose, and ultimately come to illustrate the spirit not only of their architects but those who live, love, work, and suffer within them. Even in their disuse they are symbolic and show shifts in values, finances, and ambitions. By exploring the remains of these symbols of social infrastructure and presenting the photographs of their remains, *The Age of Consequences* is a eulogy, not just for the abandoned shells of past losses and failures, but for our current culture and the losses and failures that we are currently sustaining.




the age of consequences
I think somewhere deep down inside, we all knew that
there would be a price to pay for the things we were
doing. Perhaps we thought that it would be someone else
else, or that things would magically sort themselves out. But
as time went on it became increasingly apparent that the
effects of our actions were going to be severe. Factories
closed, community schools, churches, everything from the
funds dried up for schools, churches, everything from the
arts to our infrastructure. Key businesses that were too big
to fail collapsed nonetheless, and dragged down entire
cities with them, often leaving environmental
catastrophes in their wake.
This is my collection of the things I found in the aftermath,
evidence of who we once were and what would become
of us. Our era was to become known as The Age of
Consequences, and while we knew deep in our hearts
that things were falling apart, there was a time in the
beginning where we could still look away.
- Matthew Christopher

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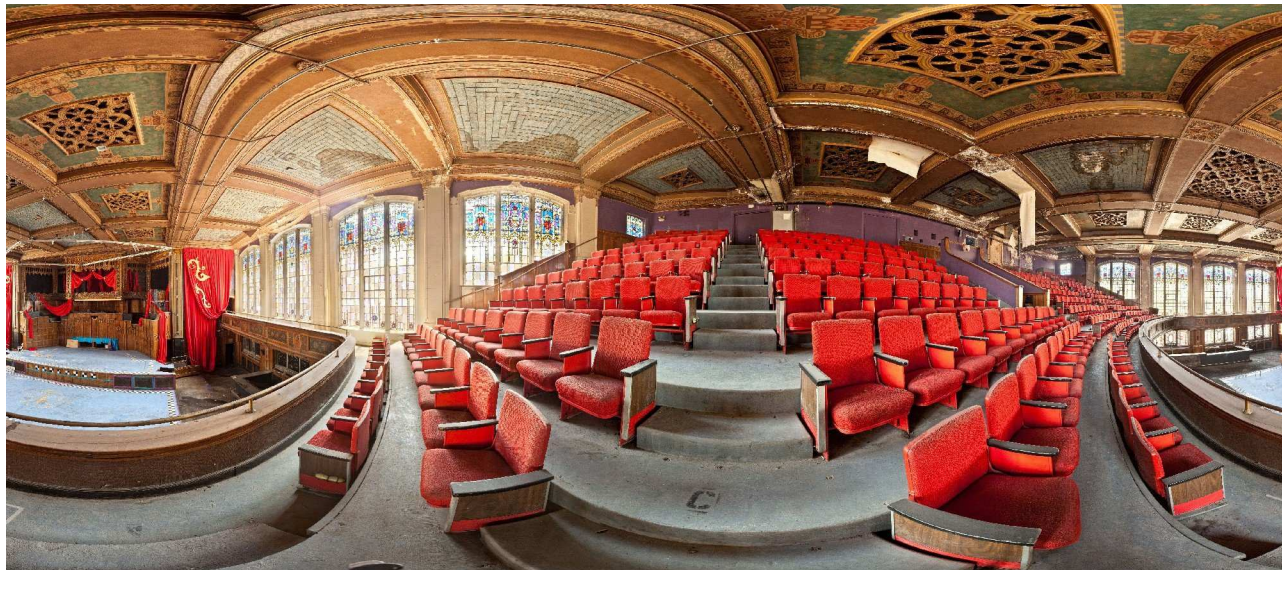

Above: Interactive 360 degree views of interior spaces were projected on the walls for the gallery display, allowing visitors to manipulate the view of a room. The viewpoint can be adjusted and it is possible to zoom in to view details.

Opposite: A gallery patron uses the interactive display to view the abandoned theater in the image above.

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